Urban Form and Social Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

Social inclusion has become a topic of growing interest among makers of social policy and researchers. In response, CMHC commissioned research to explore the role that a city's physical attributes, such as the pattern of streets, land use, open spaces, or transportation connections to other neighbourhoods, play in a community's social development. Housing, given its role in the urban landscape, is a major factor for consideration.

This research project explored the link between urban form and social inclusion in a Canadian context. The aim of the study was to review existing research about the impact of urban form and social inclusion; to identify emerging thinking; discover what other research is being done and identify research gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The three-part research strategy consisted of a literature review, interviews with key Canadian informants and a panel discussion. All three approaches tried to answer questions such as:

- What is commonly understood by the term "social inclusion"?

- What are the interactions between urban design and social inclusion and what factors affect them?

- What qualities of physical neighbourhood/community environment and features lead to higher degrees of social inclusion and well-being, and vice versa?

- Are there individual characteristics of community design that play a greater role in contributing to the well-being of the inhabitants, such as parks, public space, mix of housing, other land use and so on?

- What can be learned from existing research about urban form and social integration? What are the main gaps that should be researched? Do those gaps involve quantitative or qualitative research?

- What indicators exist to measure the different dimensions of the relationship between the physical and the social aspects of a neighbourhood or a community?

Literature review

The literature review includes published research using the concept of social inclusion/exclusion. This is rare in the American literature. For this reason, few American works are included.

However, social inclusion is rooted in much older and larger concepts and can encompass notions such as social mix and social cohesion, which are explained in the full research report. Furthermore, if the concept of social inclusion is combined with urban form, the literature on spatial segregation and social sustainability is pertinent. This review has not resolved these issues, but also has not expanded the review to encompass these concepts, unless they are directly related to works or analyses of social inclusion/exclusion.

Key informant interviews

This part of the research consisted of interviews with 15 key Canadian informants to obtain their thoughts on some of the basic questions that formed the foundation of the study. Key informants included academics who have written or worked on issues of social inclusion; municipal housing and planning staff in three major urban centres; representatives of urban, architectural and planning organizations; and, social researchers.

Topics included the concept of social inclusion, the composition of the excluded, the physical attributes of an inclusive environment and examples of inclusive neighbourhoods.

These interviews also sought to identify grey literature[1] and related research that is ongoing.

Panel discussion

Six people participated in a teleconference on May 9, 2006. In advance, panelists received a brief discussion paper highlighting some of the key points from the literature review and key informant interviews.

The aim of the panel discussion was to delve more deeply into some of the important questions pertaining to the links between social inclusion and urban form, and to build upon the knowledge gleaned from the literature and key informant interviews.

FINDINGS

"Social inclusion" and "urban form," the two terms at the heart of the study, were both amorphous and needed defining at the outset. Social inclusion proved to be much more elusive in the literature, in the interviews with key informants and in the panel discussion. As this study has revealed, the term social inclusion can refer to spatial distribution of different characteristics—economic, social, and cultural—as well as the allocation of services, accessibility and process.

Definitions

Both the literature and the discussions underline that "inclusion" as such cannot be conceived without the opposing "exclusion" because they are "inextricably intertwined" as Guildford (2000) proposes, As well, because an "in" is being delineated, "if you have inclusion you will always have exclusion" as the panel discussion revealed. If social exclusion is the process that denies people access, participation and choice, then social inclusion can be interpreted as being value-laden and normative, incorporating social justice, diversity that is valued; opportunities for choice; entitlement to rights and services; working together (Cushing 2003).

The panel discussion on the concept or idea of social inclusion also was divided about the utility of the term, but it was agreed that while social inclusion may not be universally seen as useful, there was agreement that the adjunct idea of social justice was. The definition that was proposed for this study is:

> . . . the situation in which individuals and communities (both physical and demographic) are fully involved in the society in which they reside/occur/exist, including the economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of that society.

As for urban form, Lynch's (1989) definition of "settlement form" was adopted in this study since it addresses both physical form, as well as the control of space:

> . . . settlement form is the spatial arrangement of persons doing things, the resulting spatial flows of persons, goods and information, and the physical features which modify space in some way significant to those actions, including enclosures, surfaces, channels, ambiences, and objects. Further, the description must include the cyclical and secular changes in those spatial distributions, the control of space and the perception of it. The last two, of course, are raids into the domains of social institutions and of mental life.

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[1] "Grey literature" comprises scientific and technical reports, patent documents, conference papers, internal reports, government documents, newsletters, fact sheets and theses, which are not readily available through commercial channels.

Expression within urban form

Even if there appears to be consensus that social inclusion is desirable, the knowledge of what this means in practice is less evident. There is little specific guidance that is available and accessible to practitioners, particularly at the municipal level where most land-use decisions are made.

Panelists agreed that there is a link between social inclusion/exclusion and urban form. The design and form of our cities, at both the micro (site planning) and macro (metropolitan) level, can facilitate inclusion or exclusion or at the very least, serve to maintain it. Neighbourhoods in particular are a focus of concern. Neighbourhood effects, or the social interactions that occur close to one's residence that affect social and economic well-being, are the potential vehicle for inclusion/exclusion.

The panel discussion focused on the extent or strength of the relationship: there is "clearly a relationship between built form . . . [and social inclusion] at all scales. It's not deterministic, but powerful."[2] Panelists felt that the goal of urban form should be to create inclusion in natural ways, with the recognition that form can facilitate/promote inclusion, but can not create it.

Land-use mix, public transportation, public space and social mix were the aspects of urban form that received the most attention in the Canadian literature and among the panelists, as relating to social inclusion. Urban form at all scales—the individual site, neighbourhood, city and region—plays a role in social inclusion. Scale, however, was found to mediate the nature and extent of the link between different aspects of urban form.

Mixed land use

Related to the idea of "porosity"[3] and breaking down barriers in enclosed neighbourhoods is the mix of land uses. The panelists concluded that land-use mix is one of the central elements of urban form that can promote an inclusive environment. Current zoning practices, which tend to separate uses, are partially responsible for maintaining social exclusion. Numerous key informants referred to the work of Jane Jacobs and her emphasis on the importance of mixed uses in promoting socially vital neighbourhoods and the impact not only on exchange and engagement but also on security and safety with a 24-hour city, that is, a city that lives around the clock.

Public space

Tied to mixed uses is the importance of public spaces and central area or core area—downtown spaces. They are seen as an especially important component of urban form, its civic life, and the identity of the whole city. Public space, in the sense of a widely shared public core, plays a central role in the limited urban discourse about social inclusion. Such public spaces are settings that bring people with differing backgrounds together for civic celebrations or to act as the symbolic centre of a city.

Transportation

Transportation helps to promote accessibility within the city and counteract undesirable isolation of certain groups. It is a key element in porosity, and the presence or adequacy of public transit is seen as key to maintaining access and inclusion for those without the resources to use automobile-based transportation.

For the most part, the Canadian experience of inadequate public transit, to the now fast-growing suburban municipalities that are also home to lower-income residents, acts to maintain exclusion of these groups. Lack of porosity is also seen in early public housing projects where buildings were set in "park-like" settings with no through roads.

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[2]   Panel discussion. May 9, 2006

[3]   The idea of porosity was mentioned by key informants and during the panel discussion. It includes access and openness, which are important.

Social mix

Social mix appears to be essential at the city and metropolitan level, however, many of the successes have been achieved at the neighbourhood level with social housing programs. At the same time, the political and planning process that controls these decisions must be accessible and meaningful for a diversity of groups. The study reveals that while examples of exclusion are readily available, it is much harder to find examples of inclusionary practice.

Attention to pedestrian orientation and physical safety were cited as characteristics of "inclusive" neighbourhoods. But the most common example of social inclusion are neighbourhoods or projects that have or tried to have a "social mix"—a mix of household types and income. Some key informants suggested social mix as a synonym for "social inclusion." This type of social mix is a strong thread in policy and programs in Canada, as elsewhere.

To counter the natural effect of the market, achieving social mix has typically required the use of federal, provincial and municipal policies and programs both in new and existing neighbourhoods.

Process

Panelists focused on process as well, suggesting that one way to promote social inclusion is through planning and negotiation that facilitates social transaction between people at any scale. This suggests that planned landscapes that don't work suffer from not enough diversity at the planning stage. However, it is recognized that public process is not easy or inexpensive, and can also marginalize population groups that do not or cannot participate.

CONCLUSION

While the underlying goals of social inclusion are not new, the utility of the term may be its ability to re-examine issues of inequality, uneven access to resources and the impact of this.

In Canada, the idea of social inclusion may offer the potential to re-energize old debates, particularly in the context of the increasing diversity of our large metropolitan areas. It has been suggested that the idea of social inclusion sets higher expectations for change and reaches for more ambitious indicators. Combined with urban form, it further focuses on cities and their importance economically, politically, socially and culturally. It also highlights awareness of the importance of place and interest in the role of neighbourhoods.

The ability of cities to make room for the diversity, as illustrated by the process of establishing mosques in Toronto, or wider recognition of the contribution of immigrants, as illustrated by the East London work with the Bangladeshi community, may present one of the greatest challenges confronting urban places.

FURTHER RESEARCH

There are still knowledge gaps on the links between social inclusion and urban form and this study brought forward potential research projects that could address these gaps.

Excluded groups

A fundamental question in the context of any future research on the impact of urban form and social inclusion in a Canadian context is the issue of who is excluded.

This is especially important given the dynamic nature of our cities, and the fact that they are home to a large and growing concentration of immigrants. While many would agree that the homeless, immigrants and people of Aboriginal origin represent some of the most-excluded in our society, a related investigation might look at whether there are individuals or groups who experience exclusion that we do not normally think of as being excluded. For example:

- Might way of life be the distinguishing characteristic, as opposed to tenure or class?

Social mix

There was much debate in the published and grey literature, key informant interviews and among the panelists about the social mix concept, the appropriate scale, its role and effectiveness in promoting social inclusion and how to achieve it.

There also seems to be confusion around the terms social mix and social inclusion, with some tending to use the terms interchangeably. At the very least, social mix is viewed as a component of social inclusion. This would seem to be a central issue for Canadian housing policy-makers and planners, where the notion has been adopted and used for years, specifically in the context of social housing projects. Specific research questions might be:

- What do we hope to achieve with social mix?

- What is a desirable social mix, given the ever-changing diversity of our cities?

Spatial policies for social inclusion

It was difficult for key informants and panelists to identify key physical attributes of an inclusive community and there is little literature in this area. It was much simpler to recognize the barriers inherent in an exclusive community.

The literature demonstrates a similar emphasis on physical manifestations of exclusion, although there is some evidence of the positive role of social mix, mixed land uses, public space and transportation. These are generally the purview of local planners and politicians. Both the dearth of published literature and the panel discussion point to a lack of clear direction regarding those urban forms and the elements of urban form that promote inclusion.

While mixed land use, access to public transportation, downtown public space and social mix were felt to be important, clear guidelines as to what these should look like or how they should perform are lacking. The idea of porosity was mentioned by key informants and during the panel discussion. If, in fact, small-scale social mix is not critical, but porosity, which includes access and openness, is, then it could be important to understand how porosity can be encouraged. Questions could include:

- What is a desirable mix of land uses?

- What are the best approaches for achieving it?

- At what scale?

These researches, along with what was previously and currently being done, could produce and provide some data or indicators linking the social and physical aspects of a community. In return, this information could help better understand the definition, the process and the development of social inclusion within the urban form, which would bring a potential to improve the lives of many citizens within every community.

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